

A Few Notes on Sabbath & Sunday in the New Covenant

by Tim Gallant © 2002

1. It has been argued that the Sabbath was a creation ordinance (Gen 2:1-4), and is therefore part of the Ten Commandments, and is to be perpetually binding for all peoples of all times. Even in the new heavens and the new earth, the Sabbath will be observed: “‘And it shall come to pass. . . from one Sabbath to another, all flesh shall come to worship before Me,’ says the LORD” (Is 66:23).

2. However, this understanding fails to take full account of the fact of new creation. The new covenant is not simply a restoration of the original creation. This can be seen in the parallelism between the Sabbath and other festivals and holy days. For in truth, the original creation not only included the Sabbath (Gen 2:1-4), but also the sundry religious seasons. Gen 1:14 (“Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be for *signs and seasons*. . .”) uses the same language as is employed in the Mosaic law to refer to the festivals etc.

In other words, logically speaking, if we argue normativity for the Sabbath on the basis of its being a ‘creation ordinance,’ we must also argue the same for the religious seasons of the law. Likewise with the reference to Isaiah 66:23: the phrase I omitted above reads: “from one New Moon to another,” in parallel to “from one Sabbath to another.” That is, if the language of Sabbath in Is 66:23 shows that the Sabbath will be in force for eternity, it likewise shows that the *New Moons* will be in force.

3. We know, however, that this cannot be the case, for Paul writes explicitly, “let no one judge you in food or in drink [i.e. Mosaic dietary laws], or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ” (Col 2:16-17). This passage makes it clear that observance of the new moon is abolished with Christ’s coming. Adventists suggest that ‘sabbaths’ here probably refer to *other* days than the seventh day Sabbath, but there is no foundation for this in the text. Indeed, Paul’s primary point in the context is that Gentile Christians are not bound to live as Jews. The primary defining mark of Jews in the first century, next to circumcision itself, was the observance precisely of the *weekly* Sabbath. Further, the text coheres logically if we see a progression of frequency: Paul mentions ‘a festival’ (i.e. annual), ‘new moon’ (i.e. monthly), and ‘Sabbaths’ (i.e. weekly). (A reverse direction is followed in Gal. 4:10.) Moreover, the parallelism between the weekly Sabbath and these other days (festivals and new moons) should not surprise us, given the parallelism we find between them both in Genesis 1-2, and in Isaiah 66. Quite apparently, Paul is deliberately picking up on the Old Testament association of these (Sabbath and seasons, new moons) together.

4. Paul, then, sees the weekly Sabbath as standing on the same level as the other Jewish feasts. Gentiles may not be considered obligated by them, any more than they are obligated to be circumcised.

5. While at times the Church met daily, especially early on (see Acts 2:46), once the Church was in a more settled situation, the only records giving any indication of a time of meeting show that the day was the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2).

Adventists say that the disciples in Troas met on the first day of the week in Acts 20:7 merely because this was Paul’s last day with them. This argument, however, does not pay close enough attention to the text. First, *why* was it Paul’s last day with them? We note that Paul

Notes on Sabbath and Sunday in the new covenant

stayed there *seven days* (Acts 20:6). It is most natural to infer that he stayed there long enough to be with them when they met for regular worship. And that this *was* their regular time for worship is confirmed by the actual statement in verse 7: “Now on the first day of the week, *when the disciples came together to break bread. . .*” The first day of the week, on the most natural reading, was the day on which the disciples came together as a church (compare 1 Cor 11:20).

This is confirmed by 1 Corinthians 16:2. Paul writes that the Corinthians are to lay something aside on the first day of the week. Adventists object that this does not necessarily mean a church meeting. Something could be laid aside at home. But again, this does not do justice to the text. Paul says he gives this prescription, “that there be no collections when I come.” If he was simply telling them to lay something aside at home, why bother telling them what day of the week to do it? And even more pointedly, if they laid their gifts aside at home, *there would still need to be a collection when he came*. The only proper conclusion, then, is that this ‘laying aside’ was in the context of the assembly, which took place on the first day of the week.

6. What then is to be said of Sunday? It is claimed by Adventists that the early Church did things on Sunday which no one in the first century did on what they considered a holy day. For example, it is argued that Paul’s companions boarded a ship on Sunday, while he himself travelled (Acts 20:13). Underlying this argument is the notion that the ‘day’ started in the evening, and consequently the “first day of the week” mentioned in 20:7 is still ongoing when this travelling is undertaken. For the sake of argument, I will grant that point.¹ But the real issue is that it begs the most fundamental question. *I am not claiming that Sunday was considered a holy day analogous to the Sabbath by the early Church!* This should not be surprising in the least, given what Paul says numerous times in his epistles about the observance of days (Gal 4:9-10; Col 2:16-17; cf. Rom 14:5-6).² Automatically to assume that there must be a ‘Sabbath’ of some sort (on whatever day) is to misunderstand the force of Paul’s argument in those passages. He calls the whole *concept* of such holy days “weak and beggarly elements” (Gal 4:9).

7. One must freely grant that in history, many in the Christian Church (e.g. late medieval Romanism; Puritans) have often regarded Sunday as a “new Sabbath.” Consequently, it has been burdened with a great deal of regulations drawn from the Old Testament Sabbath laws, as well as given completely non-biblical requirements in addition. Such a view of Sunday was a *development*, and even represents a *fundamental change* in the Church’s perception of how it functioned. Originally, the apostles gathered on the first day of the week, apparently because that is when the resurrected Christ first appeared to them - indeed, it was the day of that resurrection itself (e.g. Mt 28:1ff.). That resurrection appearance was important, and says something significant regarding worship on the first day of the week. But that fact does not mean that they observed it as another Sabbath.

8. What of the Sabbath observance which we find recorded in the NT? Paul, Adventists point out, regularly went into synagogues and preached. Therefore, they reason, he observed the

¹ I am not sure it is correct, because the reckoning of the first day may have employed the Roman, rather than Jewish system, i.e. morning to morning, rather than evening to evening.

² Adventists often claim that Romans 14 is not a reference to the Sabbath. However, close attention to the epistle as a whole will show that a primary concern was the issue of Jewish-Gentile relations within the Church. With no further description of the days in question given, the Sabbath was the most obvious and natural referent that would have been understood by the original readers.

Notes on Sabbath and Sunday in the new covenant

Sabbath. This, however, is too simplistic. First of all, Paul's program of ministry was "to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Rom 1:16 etc.). It is hardly surprising, then, that he sought to preach in the synagogues - and these, of course, met on the Sabbath, so naturally, that is when he preached in them.

Second, the example of the first Jewish Christians is not in all things normative for the Gentile Church. For example, the Jerusalem Christians still worshipped in the temple (see e.g. Acts 3:1). They still circumcised their male children and observed the law of Moses. This is implicit in the demand made by Christianized Pharisees that the Gentiles do the same (Acts 15:5). It is likewise implicit in the (false) rumours about Paul which the Jerusalem leaders reported to him: namely, that he was teaching Jews to forsake Moses, to abstain from circumcising their children, and to refrain from the other Jewish customs (Acts 21:20-21). (Paul of course, stressed that the Gentiles need not - indeed should not - do all these things, but there is no record that he forbade Jewish Christians to do so - except insofar as it might impinge upon table fellowship with Gentiles, Gal 2:11-20).

All of this shows that the Jewish Christians continued to keep the Mosaic law, even with regard to its ceremonial aspects. *But that cannot prove that Gentiles were to do so.* Indeed, that is the whole burden of the apostolic council in Acts 15.

Consequently, there is no surprise if Paul observed the Sabbath. That is what we would expect he would do. After all, he himself said that he became as a Jew, that he might win Jews, and that to those under the law, he became one as was under the law (1 Cor 9:20). Note that he had to *become* this. Why? Because in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek (Gal 3:28), and the law, which had served as a custodian (*pedagogue*) between Moses and Christ's coming, is now removed (see Gal 3:19-25). But even as Paul circumcised Timothy (who had a Jewish mother) in order not to offend the Jews whom he was evangelizing (Acts 16:1-3), he no doubt also refrained from working on the Sabbath, and attended the synagogues and preached in them (as long as the synagogue rulers would let him, anyway).

9. *Summary:* The Sabbath was a shadow which was only operative until the coming of Christ. With Christ's coming, the Church began to meet on Sunday, but did not create a 'new Sabbath.' While there are certainly *practical* reasons to refrain from working on Sunday (it is healthy to have a day off, and it is easier to prepare for and focus upon worship), these are not inherently 'holiness' reasons after the order of the Old Testament Sabbath.

It is true that the first day of the week incorporates some of the necessary Sabbath functions. Most specifically, no less in the new covenant than in the old, there needs to be regular stated times of corporate worship. And because corporate worship is meeting with the rest-giving Christ, there is even a sense in which Sunday may appropriately be called "the Christian Sabbath" (i.e. because *Sabbath* means *rest*). But we need to be aware that there is typology and analogy involved; the literal Sabbath *is no more*.

Please note that these are initial exploratory reflections for the furtherance of Christian dialogue. The author grants that this subject deserves more fulsome treatment, but nonetheless suggests that the biblical evidence includes material which provides serious challenges for both "seventh-day" proponents and "Sunday-Sabbatarians."